



**OUR MISSION:**

Working to enhance the economic prosperity of greater Silver Spring through robust promotion of our member businesses and unrelenting advocacy on their behalf.

April 10, 2023

The Honorable Evan Glass  
and Members of the Montgomery County Council  
100 Maryland Avenue, Sixth Floor  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Council President Glass and Members of the Council:

On behalf of the Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, representing more than 300 employers, mostly small businesses, and several non-profit organizations in greater Silver Spring and surrounding areas in Montgomery County, we are submitting these comments for your review and consideration as you deliberate action on the County Executive's proposed FY24 Operating Budget and Public Services Program.

Our concerns this year focus on four critical budget areas that must be addressed to assure a clean, safe, and welcoming Silver Spring and protect the investments that both the County and countless private stakeholders have made in our community. These are: (1.) the Silver Spring Urban District (SSUD), (2.) the Silver Spring Parking Lot District (PLD), (3.) Health & Human Services (HHS), specifically Progress Place, Homeless Services, and Behavioral Health and Crisis Services; and (4.) the Montgomery County Police, specifically the budget allocated for the Central Business District policing area (Police).

We believe that Silver Spring has been on the edge of a tipping point for a number of years, only worsened by the pandemic, from which our commercial base has not recovered. Fewer and fewer businesses are coming to Silver Spring and more and more are leaving. The overall population of the Central Business District has grown dramatically, but the government investment in many areas to support that growth has not kept pace. The numbers of homeless and other vulnerable individuals in our community continues to grow. Even more unfortunate, the increase in our homeless population continues to be accompanied by an increasing number of individuals having mental health issues, who are impacting the quality of life on our sidewalks, in our businesses, in the library and other public places. Further, increased criminal activity has left many residents and employers reluctant to come to or remain in Silver Spring.

Workers, shoppers, visitors, and residents who do visit Silver Spring find broken sidewalks and curbs, colored markings on the sidewalks long since abandoned by whatever construction project for which they were required, street light poles where the paint has been etched away by road-treatment chemicals, litter on the sidewalks, rusty, battered, broken, and often-overflowing trash cans (especially on weekend nights), and tree pits void of any vegetation. We often hear the words shabby or scuffed when people talk about Silver Spring.

Sadly, as mentioned previously, budget for the services that keep our community attractive, clean, and safe has not kept pace with this growth. In fact, it has remained flat, at best. Greater investment needs to be made in Silver Spring if it is to take its rightful place as a business and residential hub, and economic engine, of Montgomery County. We believe investment is necessary in the following areas, noting, where possible, the various County budgets that apply:

**Public Safety & Security**

Continue implementing policies and practices that increase the number of police officers in the County, with the eventual goal of creating a new police district headquartered in downtown Silver Spring. (Police) Despite

reflecting an increase in spending for police, the County Executive's recommended FY24 budget does not actually cover hiring more patrol officers. It includes the \$20,000 signing bonus for new officers as well as pay increases for existing officers, both of which the Chamber supports. However, aside from compensation, it is largely a same-services budget that does not allow for the creation of a new Silver Spring district. The County Council needs to reconsider this and invest in a safer Silver Spring.

Create a permanent Silver Spring Crisis Response Team that operates 24/7 exclusively in Silver Spring to respond to behavioral health related incidents that do not require a police response. (HHS) We strongly support the efforts currently underway within the Police Department to train officers who will become part of a joint crisis response team with personnel from HHS. In addition, the HHS Budget for Crisis Response appears to increase the number of outreach personnel by 14 FTEs. If these are actually hired, a challenge often cited by HHS staff, they will be a welcome addition to the crisis response team. And, if they are hired, they should be assigned exclusively to Silver Spring to create a round-the-clock response that will relieve the burden of having police respond to individuals experiencing mental health crises. WE NEED the County Council to vehemently support this effort by the Montgomery County Police Department.

Enact Bill 14-23 (Late Night Establishment Security Plan) with amendments to assure compliance (stiffer penalties) and give police the ability to shut down establishments that do not comply. (Council)

Invest Montgomery County (not Parking Lot District) funds to assure that **county-owned garages** are safe. This includes installing cameras inside garages and stairwells (not just at the payment bays) and providing sufficient DOT security personnel to patrol the garages, as cameras alone do not deter wrongdoing. (General Fund or MCDOT)

As it is, the proposed budget for the Silver Spring Parking Lot District recommends charging for Saturday parking to generate some \$1.2 million in revenue, despite the fact that the budget documents show a 10% decrease in revenues from parking fees. These funds are planned for increased expenses in the budget including converting Garages 4, 5/55, and 60/60 to pay by cell or pay by plate system; installing a new counting systems in garages; implementing Saturday enforcement (additional staff to write tickets); and a 8.3% increase in salaries. From the documents available to the public online, it is impossible to tell whether forgoing these additional expenses would preclude the need to add paid parking for Saturdays, something that has been of concern to the Chamber for years, but has been advocated by DOT as necessary. We need the Council to continue to look for ways to fund safer garages and continued free access on weekends.

Install a crosswalk on East-West Highway near where the new park will be built.

Identify other areas in the Central Business District where new crosswalks would enhance pedestrian safety and develop a budget and timeline for installing such.

Develop a plan to create a safe and inviting link from Georgia Avenue under the CSX rail tracks to South Silver Spring and East-West Highway.

Enforce the No Parking laws on all Silver Spring streets, particularly Georgia Avenue and East West Highway by the Hertz rental at 8000 Georgia Ave. (MCDOT)

Continue the Silver Spring Urban District "Safe Escort" program as a service to the community. (SSUD)

### **Attractive & Inviting**

Silver Spring needs a comprehensive beautification plan that can be implemented and maintained. (SSUD)

Identify areas that can benefit from decorative street lighting (in the trees) and implement plans for installation and maintenance.

Inventory all broken sidewalks and curbs throughout the Central Business District, repair everything, and develop a plan to keep sidewalks and curbs in repair moving forward. Note: Either persuade the State to repair curbs and sidewalks along its right-of-way, or assume responsibility for these areas. (These include repairing the curb in front of AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural, which has been broken for years.)

Identify and repair/repaint all county-owned street-lamp poles and develop a plan to keep them looking attractive.

Replace the broken or missing decorative boarder fencing around tree pits throughout the Central Business District and install attractive plantings that will survive in high traffic/usage areas such as along Georgia Avenue between Wayne Avenue and Sligo Avenue, as well as along Fenton Street between Colesville Road and Second Avenue.

Repair Roeder Road (It's sinking.)

The proposed budget for the Urban District notes that it will address reducing sidewalk tripping hazards and "dramatically shrink" the backlog of sidewalk repairs but does not specify how this will be accomplished and maintained.

Overall, as mentioned earlier, while the population of Silver Spring has grown dramatically in recent years, the budget for the services that keep our community clean and safe has not kept pace with this growth.

Now is NOT the time to reduce investment in assuring a "Clean and Safe" Silver Spring. As we see no slow down to the growth of our population, we need more services to serve the increase in residents. Further, if we are to attract commercial tenants that can provide jobs to those residents, presenting a "Clean and Safe" community becomes even more critical. We are concerned that the "maintenance of effort" budget proposed by the Executive falls short in meeting the needs of our community. We need the Council to focus on and support making Silver Spring a more vibrant and safer community in all ways.

In conclusion, both the County and many private entities have made enormous investments in Silver Spring. We believe that the requests we offer in this letter in lieu of testimony will serve to protect those investments and help to assure a safe, secure, and vibrant future for Silver Spring. We urge you to seriously consider our requests as you deliberate the FY24 Operating Budget.

Should you have questions, don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Helsing  
President & CEO